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ABSTRACT

The locus of operation for management and support of linking agents in Florida is the Teacher Education Center (TEC), with the linkage strategy being the Florida Linkage System (FLS). FLS is a problem-solving model being field tested in eight TECs incorporating twenty-eight site schools, through an R&D utilization project funded by the National Institute of Education. The linking agent, a member of the TEC staff, assists schools at any point in the problem-solving process. This assistance ranges from making arrangements for technical assistance from a university or state education agency (SEA) consultant to providing such technical assistance himself or herself, depending upon the expertise of the linker. The effectiveness of linkers in working with a school site is highly contingent upon the principal's commitment to the problem solving/change process. Training of linkers has been both formal and informal. The formal program involves training teams, composed of linkers, two or three school facilitators, and university and SEA technical assistants. Activities include assessing organizational needs in a school, use of individual strengths to maximize teamwork, communication, and group process skills and use of force field analysis to clarify problems and develop problem statements. A network of management and support is necessary for the evolving role of linker. Financial support, ready access to someone who can help solve a problem or just be sympathetic and encouraging, and management of support resources are among the ways Florida is attempting to contribute to the institutionalization of the vital role of linker. (Author)

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The Director of Linking Agents: Providing Management and Support

Claire W. Duncan

There are two particular givens one must consider when discussing management and support of linking agents in Florida. One of these is the need for a locus of operation. A second is the necessity for a linkage strategy.

In Florida the locus of operation is the Teacher Education Center. The Florida Legislature created Teacher Education Centers through the TEC Act of 1973. Any district or collection of districts can form a Teacher Education Center. The primary focus is staff development, and the governance, while under the jurisdiction of District Boards of Education, must be by an Advisory Council composed of a majority of classroom teachers. Other Council members are representatives of a collaborating university or universities, school board, district administration, lay public, teacher unions, etc. The non-majority membership is determined by individual TEC policies. Each TEC has a director recommended by the Advisory Council to, and appointed by, the District School Board. In the case of multiple district centers, the school board of the district in which the TEC director's office is located has legal jurisdiction. The centers are financed by funds earmarked by the TEC legislation as a part of the state funds going to districts.

A second requirement for managing and supporting linkage agents is a defined linkage strategy. In Florida, the linkage strategy is labeled the "Florida Linkage System," or FLS. FLS is a system of school based problem solving. Explained in broad terms, FLS consists of five sub-systems: problem identification, linkage, information resources, research and development, and solution selection/implementation. A school identifies

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a problem and is linked to an R & D resource base for a search of possible solutions if the problem is not solvable locally. The problem is searched, an option package is returned, and the options are analyzed by the school. The "best fit" is selected, and implementation plans are developed for the adoption or adaption. If no solution is found, the problem is referred to district, state, university or national R & D.

The ultimate goal of the Florida R & D Utilization Project, funded for 30 months by the National Institute of Education, is to install the Florida Linkage System throughout the state. This means that the goal is that all schools in the state will be involved in a systematic problem solving process. This also means the linkage function, which is an important part of FLS, will be in the form of a person or the performance of the function by the school itself. The logical vehicle for the linkage function is the already established Teacher Education Center. The Florida Linkage System is being piloted in eight such Centers, which incorporate twenty-eight site schools. In the first phase of the project, five TECs and twenty schools were involved. In Phase II beginning the second project year, three TECs and nine schools were added.

Who or what is a linker in this process? Samuel Johnson said there are two kinds of knowledge: that we know and that we know where to find. In the Florida project there are many linkers if we refer to those who know where to find knowledge. For example, there are directors of Teacher Education Centers, there are Curriculum Consultants on district staffs, there are professors based in universities, and there are subject area Consultants based in the Department of Education in Tallahassee. These are all linkers in the classical sense of knowing where to locate information and providing access to resources. In the Florida project, they are defined as technical assistants.

The linker in this project is the person employed for the particular purpose as a member of a Teacher Education Center staff.

The linker not only serves as an information retriever, but also as a process change agent with a foot in each camp: that of the school and that of the district administration. In most instances, the position to be filled by a "linker" was approved by the district school board, the position was advertised, applicants were interviewed, and a selection was made. The applicants were hired as assistants to the TEC director, because at the onset of the project, "linker" was a very nebulous term. It was not exactly clear what would be required.

Where did Florida find these paragons of virtue, you ask. The eight in the Florida project are from a variety of backgrounds and experiences. (There are four females and four males, by the way.) They range from 26 years of age with no teaching experience to the early fifties and a college professor with many years of teaching behind him.

You're probably wondering about the linker who is a college professor. You're right, he didn't apply for one of the district positions! The Florida Legislature enacted a bill mandating all state colleges of education to reduce the number of persons involved in pre-service education and devote more hours to non-credit service to schools. Our professor linker is assigned to the Teacher Education Center fulltime as one college's contribution to the non-credit service mandate. He is delighted, as he prefers this sort of assignment.

By virtue of the organizational placement of Teacher Education Centers, the linker is a school district staff member. In a few instances this has posed problems. In the beginning, some school sites looked upon the linker as

another supervisor coming out to tell them what to do, or to "snoopervise." With patience and a helpful attitude, this was overcome. Most sites now have become very dependent upon the linker.

The effectiveness of the linker in working with a school site, as one might readily predict, is highly contingent upon the principal's commitment to the problem solving/change process. The linker works closely with a team of facilitators in each site. In most cases the principal is a member of this team, and in some schools, is the chief facilitator. There are a few sites in which the linker has learned to by-pass the principal, while keeping him or her informed. In other words, the principal is not really committed, but he does not block the process. As stated earlier a linker is a process change agent, almost like a trainer. If he or she works effectively with facilitators and school faculties, the schools will acquire the change agent skills and can then become their own brokers. So, you see, if a linker is very successful, he could work himself out of a job by developing linker skills in the school. (I feel constrained to say here that none of the Florida linkers has yet reached this level of success.)

In addition to working with schools, linkers in the Florida project serve a very vital function as data collectors. Once schools have identified a problem for which they wish a search made, linkers assist in writing a problem description and search request. The search is then submitted to both a search unit and project management. When a school has selected the product or program they wish to implement to ameloriate the identified problem, linkers are again called upon to assist in writing a solution implementation plan which is sent to project management. Of course, linkers have assisted, or arranged for consultants to assist, at the problem

identification and the solution selection stages, and have transmitted the search request.

Each month linkers submit a log of activities to the management office. The report contains citings of what contacts were made or what services were performed in the schools, and their outcome; descriptions of any problems, and the strategies used to solve them, and descriptions of the serendipitious happenings. They also assist in collecting data for project evaluation.

After this rather extensive description of the linker milieu, it is appropriate to describe the kind of management and support needed for the linker in the TEC to implement FLS. First, there is financial support. The project is supplying funds to the participating Teacher Education Centers for linker salaries. Most school districts in Florida have had a severe reduction of district level administrative staff. It was too much to ask of an already overburdened supervisor or Curriculum Consultant to assume additional duties of a function that had yet to be defined and would probably take a large percentage of time. The original intent was to provide 100% salary support for linkers during the first year of project participation, 50% the second year, and 25% the third year, the assumption being that the district would gradually assume the funding and institutionalize the position. Many school superintendents however, are committed to no increases in staff at the district level, so it was an uncertain time for TEC directors and linkers at the end of the first year. Where was the other half of the linker salary coming from? Were they going to be employed at all? If one is familiar with school districts, he knows that the longer a person is in a position, from whatever the salary source, the more likely he will be

retained by the "powers that be," if he is at all efficient. We discovered, as has research before us, that institutionalization does not take place that quickly, and are now attempting to shift funds within the project budget for full support for linkers. We, and the TEC directors, feel this will strengthen the linker position and lead toward institutionalization.

Another category of support is training. Linkers were trained in teams by the training unit. The teams included the linker, school facilitators and the Department of Education and University technical assistants specifically assigned to those schools. Through the training activities, group rapport was developed. This greatly assisted in overcoming the linker's association with central management. The site schools have said they need a person to identify with, to feel comfortable with, and one who identifies with them. The training was designed to help accomplish that. A formal week-long program consisted of such activities as assessing organizational needs in a school, practicing communication and group process skills, analyzing the school as a social system, using individual strengths to maximize team work, increasing self-knowledge of how one works in groups, and using force field analysis to develop problem statements. Some additional training has taken place at subsequent linker meetings. The training unit continues to be most supportive of linkers through follow-up and on site training.

Peer support has been extremely important, as linkers assumed a role which no one could tell them much about. An invisible college, with linkers in geographical proximity calling or visiting each other to discuss problems and exchange ideas, has evolved into a visible college, with planned monthly meetings. The meetings are held at various TECs in the project, with project

funds supporting travel costs. A great deal of time is spent sharing activities, problems and successes at site schools. This has been particularly helpful to the three Phase II linkers who entered the project in August 1977. They have profited from the year's experience gained by the five linkers in Phase I. These monthly meetings are used also by project management to explain various data collection processes, or by the training unit to meet emerging training needs. How to assist schools with problem identification, analyzing alternative solutions, strategies for getting a site moving when they are at a stand-still for some reason, kinds of training needed by linkers - are among the topics discussed at monthly linker meetings. These meetings, held by project management at the request of linkers, are often attended by a member of the training unit and/or a member of the R & D search unit.

Another vital mechanism for linker support is the telephone. Some TECs are as far away as three hundred fifty miles and costs of frequent management visits would be prohibitive. Thus, project management maintains close telephone contact, talking with linkers at least once each week and sometimes more often. Linkers report that it is of extreme importance for them to be able to call for help and get an immediate response. The quicker the response, the more credibility of the linker is strengthened with the site. The call may be to project management, but often it is to a member of the R & D search unit or the training unit. The help may take the form of verbal information, printed material, agreeing to contact a consultant or program representative, or it may be a visit to a site with the linker to provide assistance with a site problem.

The linkers have been trained, there is peer support, and monthly meetings are held, but there must be more. There must be on-the-job access

to resources. These resources have been briefly alluded to earlier. Easy access is provided to an R & D search unit, called Options from R & D (ORD). ORD is available to search for options which best fit a problem, and to assist linkers/schools in analyzing proposed solutions. The unit maintains a materials bank which is made available to schools so they can look at actual materials before making an adoption decision.

Another available resource is the Diffusion Trairing Unit (DTU). This unit designed and conducted a week-long training program for project participants. They have done follow-up training at linker meetings, and have assisted linkers with site school problems.

University personnel and Department of Education consultants are available for assistance to linkers or facilitators at any phase of the FLS process. Neither of these resources has been called upon extensively, but they are available and linkers know about them.

An important function of management is to orchestrate all the resources. Formalizing communications through meetings and notes of meetings, keeping calendars of what is going on when, seeing that all units are functioning as they should, bringing together the project Advisory Council and the various review panels, all are management responsibilities. Then, of course, there is information transmittal through correspondence and the telephone.

Management and support is still more complex, when one considers that linkers have a series of managers: the Teacher Education Center Director, the TEC Advisory Council, the District Superintendent and School Board, and Project Management. Project management has a stronger voice than one would suppose, since, as stated earlier, funds from the project budget are provided for linker salaries.

In summary, a network of management and support is needed for the evolving role of linker. Financial support, ready access to someone who can help solve a problem or just be sympathetic and encouraging, and management of the support resources are among the ways Florida is attempting to contribute to the institutionalization of the very vital role of linker.